

Aurora teacher ‘poster child’ for vocational rehab

by Laurie Pfeifer

Zach High knows first-hand the difficulties facing many special education students -- their learning struggles, self-esteem issues, the teasing and taunting they often endure.

Born premature, weighing just two pounds, facing nerve damage, hearing loss and a doctor's prediction he and his twin brother, Nate, would never graduate from high school, High became his own strongest advocate and has beaten the odds to a pulp.

"He's our poster child. We're very proud of Zach," said Rita Meier, employment specialist with Vocational Rehabilitation in Grand Island, who began working with High when he was a sophomore at Aurora High School.

High not only graduated from high school, he graduated from college with a 3.5 grade point average and aced his first and only job interview.

Today, as a first-year special education teacher in Aurora Elementary School, High not only is his own advocate, he's an advocate for all students with disabilities and their capacity to be valuable members of the workforce.

Things could have turned out drastically different for High if not for supportive parents, teachers and coaches who doubled as mentors and Vocational Rehabilitation specialists working tirelessly with him every step of the way.

Survival was a miracle

High said it's somewhat of a miracle he and Nate are alive today, given the fact they were born so prematurely.

Beyond the premature birth, there was the fact Zach suffered hearing loss.

"With twins, there's blood-to-blood transfusion. We shared the same blood and Nate got most of it. That's what cause my nerve damage and hearing loss," High explained. "When we survived, the doctor told our parents given our disabilities, he didn't think we would graduate from high school."

A special education student his entire life, High started speech therapy at the age of 2 in Oklahoma. That enabled him to speak regularly instead of signing to communicate.

The twins' spent their lower elementary grades in Oklahoma, where High said his teachers wore a microphone that transmitted directly through his hearing aids to help him hear better.

The High family moved to Elkhorn, where the twins spent their upper elementary and middle school years.

As freshmen, they started school in Aurora where they were met by teachers and coaches who not only educated them, but mentored them.

The Aurora schools also set him up with Vocational Rehabilitation in Grand Island where they helped him explore his interests and identify his skills and abilities.

High said Vocational Rehabilitation was constantly check in on him to make sure he was doing what he was supposed to be doing.

"They did yearly reviews, helped with college funding and my hearing aid funding," High said. "I'd have never been able to afford my hearing aids otherwise."

High's own determination, coupled with the mentoring he received, led him to three-sport athlete status in Aurora, where he competed in cross country, basketball and track. He was good enough to earn a track scholarship to the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

"I wasn't going to let anything stop me," High said.

High attended UNK one year, then transferred to Wayne State College where he earned his bachelor of science degree in education, mild/moderate, for grades K-12.

Why special education?

“With my history and then seeing others in special education being made fun of, being a special education teacher seemed right to me,” he said. “People can’t help they were born with a disability and they need extra help so they can succeed.”

After graduating Wayne State with a 3.5 grade point average, High’s job search started and ended in Aurora. “This was my one and only interview. I had confidence going into the interview. I didn’t have any doubt,” he said.

As a first-year teacher in Aurora Elementary School, High teaches fourth and fifth grade math and fifth grade reading for special education students, then goes into the regular classroom to help out.

His message to other employers -- be open to those who have a disability.

“I’ve seen lots of people with disabilities who can succeed at the task they’re given. They want to work. They want to be like everyone else,” he said. “Don’t be afraid to take a chance on the. A lot of them have better work ethics than those who don’t have a disability.”

Zach is married to the former Kylie Beck who is a registered nurse in Central City.